

Senate Bill 372
February 1, 2007
Presented by Chris Smith
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Chris Smith, Chief of Staff of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

SB 372 would establish a wolf hunting license at the cost of \$19 for residents and \$350 for non-residents. It would also authorize the FWP Commission to issue one wolf and one grizzly bear license through a lottery or auction each year.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) announced earlier this week that they have begun the process to delist wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains. This action, which is expected to take about a year, will be the final step necessary to return management authority of wolves to the state of Montana. Under current Montana law, when wolves are delisted by the FWS, FWP will reclassify them under state law to a "species in need of management." The FWP Commission can subsequently reclassify wolves as game animals or furbearers or approve hunting and trapping seasons as a species in need of management.

Montana's wolf management plan, which was approved by the FWS, makes clear that hunting and trapping will be used as a management tool to regulate wolf numbers and distribution and reduce conflicts. This is no different than the way black bears or mountain lions are managed.

Wolves could be taken by trappers, under the authority of a resident trappers license, during any trapping season set by the FWP Commission. To allow hunting of wolves, the legislature will need to establish a wolf hunting license, as proposed in SB 372. The FWP Commission could then allow hunting of wolves under regulations similar to those used to manage harvest of mountain lions or black bears. FWP anticipates that wolf hunting and trapping would be managed similar to lion hunting or bobcat hunting and trapping, where quotas are established for given districts, harvest is closely monitored and seasons are closed by field order if the quota is reached.

The FWS initiated the process to delist grizzly bears in the Greater Yellowstone area just over a year ago, and has indicated their intent to issue a final decision delisting grizzlies within the next few months. Montana's FWS-approved grizzly bear management plan for southwest Montana also makes clear that hunting will be a part of the management program for this species. Current law already provides for both resident (\$50) and non-resident (\$300) grizzly bear licenses. All that is required to resume hunting grizzly bears is for the commission to determine that there is a harvestable surplus, that hunting is appropriate for a given area and to set a quota on the number of licenses to be issued or bears to be taken.

Given the relatively low reproductive rate and number of grizzly bears, FWP anticipates that hunting will be introduced gradually for this species. Thus for the foreseeable future, the number of grizzly bear licenses issued will likely be very limited. These conditions lend themselves to issuance of a grizzly bear license through a lottery or auction that could raise significant funding to help cover the cost of grizzly bear conservation.

FWP appreciates Sen. Balyeat's sponsorship of SB 372, so that all the necessary tools will be in place to implement approved management plans for wolves and grizzly bears as soon as delisting occurs.